

LOVE, GRACE, AND DUTY

A Sermon for the Eleventh Sunday after Trinity, 2011

On the Text: Propers for the Day

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In his book, *The Harmony of the Collects, Epistles, and Gospels*, The Rev. Melville Scott notes that the first twelve Sundays after Trinity form a unit. He put it this way: “The first twelve Sundays after Trinity, which make up the first half of the Trinity series, form an orderly exposition of the great fundamental truths of the religious life. Five Sundays of the love of God in His relation to man are followed by another five Sundays of Duty, or man’s relation to God. Two Sundays remain, and are employed to explain the Doctrine of Grace, and to show how the love of God, which binds to duty, also makes possible the fulfillment of Duty, and not only constrains, but enables. Thus the whole series may be summed up in three words: *Love, Duty, Grace.*”

A few weeks ago, I quoted R. Kent Hughes as saying that a preacher should preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. It seems that an Anglican minister should do something similar, more like preaching with the Propers in one hand and the newspaper in the other, where of course we recognize that four of the five items that make up the Propers for any particular Sunday are taken directly from the Bible, while the one part that is not, the Collect, is always a prayer that points to the theological theme that is common to the other four parts. Let’s see if we can relate some current events to today’s Propers and some other parts of the Bible.

In doing this today, I may say some things that may upset some of you, that may make some of you angry. I realize that may happen, but please know that it is not my intention to do that. It is my intention only to preach the words of Jesus Christ and His disciples, and in doing so, tell you some things that Jesus said are important.

The current events I am referring to are those happening right now in this country, the build-up for the commemoration next Sunday of the terrorist attack on the United States on September 11th, 2001. The National Geographic channel on television is carrying stories on everything from the planning for the attack and what is known about the terrorists and what they did on the

days before it, through the attack itself, and the aftermath all the way up through the recent killing of Osama bin Laden.

And then there is the cover story on the September issue of *Christianity Today*. The cover shows the picture of the second plane headed for the tower that had not yet been hit and features a story on it titled, “The Gospel at Ground Zero” with the unlikely sub-header of “**The horrors of 9/11 were not unlike those of Good Friday**”, an idea I happen to think is complete nonsense.

That sub-header is completely misleading because the author’s concern is directed toward the controversy between those who think those disturbing images should not be shown and those who think they should be shown often. The author tells both sides of that controversy fairly, comparing the 9/11 attack to other horrible things in our history such as Lynchings, Pearl Harbor, and the Holocaust; but then going on to compare 9/11 to the horror of the Crucifixion, which, he did not mention, is rather graphically depicted in the movie, *The Passion of the Christ*.

The author of this article is Russell D. Moore, who is the Dean of the School of Theology at the Southern Baptist Theological seminary, and I think that he and his article were poorly treated by some assistant editor in an attempt to sell magazines. It is actually a good article and points out how so many churches have tried to “sanitize” the Christian religion by removing or failing to mention the blood and death that lie at the foundation of our religion and also hiding the fact of the continual spiritual warfare that still goes on in the world. The devil, Satan, does still exist, and he still goes forth as St. Peter said in 1 Peter 5:8 **Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour**. The apocalyptic language in the Book of Revelation is also not what we think would be good for bedtime stories for three year old children; so I find that I agree with Dean Moore, but not with C/T’s headline writer.

My disagreement with the magazine’s title and subtitle is both substantive and theological. In terms of substance, the 9/11 attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Center almost seemed to be as far away in time and space as the attack on Pearl Harbor. I heard the announcement of the Pearl Harbor attack over the radio as a four-year-old child in the lobby of my uncle’s hotel in Rocky Mount, N. C. I had no idea what it meant, but I understood that it was something the adults were really upset about.

When the 9/11 attack happened, I was just waking up when Penny called to me from the kitchen. She had heard of the first plane hitting the tower on the radio. Because she had not heard the details, she thought it was probably a small plane and turned on the TV and called me.

I got to see the event of the second plane hitting its tower. Then just before Penny left to go to work in Ignacio, we heard over the TV that a plane had hit the Pentagon. I sat there, transfixed, most of the morning and watched the towers fall. The enormity of what had happened could not penetrate the numbness. It was more than obvious that it was accompanied by the deaths of a great number of people, but it seemed it might as well have happened in another universe or on a Hollywood sound stage or special effects studio.

I sat there, numb and in denial, and watched for I don't know how long until the TV showed some pictures from just inside the first floor of one of the towers where a bunch of police were stationed to keep people from entering. Every now and then there was a very loud and sharp BAM!!!! It did not take me long to figure out that that was the sound of the body of someone hitting the portico roof at about 120 miles per hour. That realization penetrated my numbness, and I began to hurt down deep. Anger at those who did this did not come until later.

The substantive difference between that act of terrorism and the Crucifixion is simple: In the Crucifixion, only three people were killed: two common criminals and Jesus Christ who was innocent of all but some trumped up charges of heresy, while in four incidents on 9/11 the total number killed was over 2900. One estimate gives 2960+, while another gives 2983. Whatever the true number is, at least 2900 innocent people were killed on 9/11.

Theologically speaking, the difference is enormous. 2900+ died on 9/11, but not a one of them was sinless, and not a one of their deaths had any effect on our salvation. At the Crucifixion, three men died, one of whom, Jesus Christ, was the only sinless person since Adam and Eve, who were sinless until they ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge; but it was Jesus' death that redeemed us, paid the debt that none of us could ever pay, and bought our salvation. What's more, no matter how much pain and anguish that was felt by those who died in those attacks that day, I don't think it can compare to what Jesus felt on the Cross, and I don't mean the physical pain of the Crucifixion. He knew it would not be easy. Why else would He have asked God to "take this cup" from Him? But who can know how He felt, He who had been a member in the love and glory of the Trinity for an eternity, when suddenly God the Father could not even look upon Him when He took the weight of the world's sin upon Himself; and He cried out, "My God, My God, Why has Thou forsaken Me?" I think no human anguish can match that. And yet, the Father's gift of His Son to die for us was an unmatched gift of Grace for all Mankind.

God's gifts of grace to us began with Creation, the creation of the universe and the earth, and then us humans. Because He created us in His image, which is spiritual and not physical, His relationship to us and with us has always been in the form of covenants, with His saying something along the line of, "I have done this; and if you do that, I shall do this more." The that in the "if you do that" is usually something on the order of "Keep My commandments" Doing that is something that Adam and Eve and all of the rest the people in human history have had a hard time doing. Man is just too pig-headed, or, as God called the Jews, "[stiff-necked](#)"; and that is what has led to anger and hatred and wars and ultimately, to 9/11.

Our Gospel lesson for today, the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, is one that most everybody knows. The Pharisee stands proudly and thanks God because he is better than other men, or so he thinks. The publican will not even look up to heaven, but smites his breast and says, "God be merciful to me, a sinner." Jesus tells us that the God forgives the humble publican, but does not forgive the proud Pharisee.

Now, here is where it gets hard. Jesus also tells us in his explanation of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew that we have to forgive others, that's have to, must, and with no exceptions, in Matthew 6:14-15 [4 For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, 15 but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.](#) I'm sorry, but every time a lesson comes up that talks about forgiveness, these two verses come to mind, and I think they are especially pertinent when we think about those who have attacked us and caused great death and destruction.

Does everybody know who Mohammed Atta was? He was one of the terrorists who was at the controls of one of the planes that flew into the towers of the World Trade Center on 9/11 in 2001. Have you forgiven him? Do you think you can ever forgive him? If you can't, you had better get out your Bible and re-read what Jesus said there in Matthew 6 right after He gave the disciples the Lord's Prayer. Some of you may be thinking, "[Oh, he stands up there preaching, telling us what to do in a situation like this. Well, I bet he doesn't forgive those people either.](#)"

Can I really forgive Atta and the rest of his band of terrorists, way deep down in side me? I don't know, but I do know I have to try to do it; and here is a way to think of it that can make it easier. When one persons sins against another, the sinner incurs a debt that he has to pay. That is why in St. Matthew's record of the Lord's Prayer, he records what Jesus said as saying in Matthew 6:12 [12 And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.](#), while St. Luke records

the same saying as saying, Luke 11:4 **4 And forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us.** There are three different words in Greek for debts, sins and trespasses.

We may think that Atta owed each of us something, but he is dead; so he really does not owe any of *us* anything. If you understand that he does not owe you anything because he is dead, then you have forgiven him of that debt. After all, what more can you do? Just remember that he also owes a big debt to God, and it is God who said through Moses, in Deuteronomy 32:35 **35 Vengeance is mine, and recompense, for the time when their foot shall slip; for the day of their calamity is at hand, and their doom comes swiftly.**, which is what St. Paul repeated in slightly different words in Romans 12:19. However he followed that with a quote from Proverbs 25:21 and ended that chapter with an admonition **Romans 12:19-21 19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," says the Lord. 20 To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.**

There are some things we just have to leave up to God. Forgiveness to the best of our ability is our responsibility. Vengeance, Mercy, Absolution, and Grace are His to give, not ours. However, man is not left powerless in the face of war or terrorist enmity. In Romans 13, St. Paul tells us of the power of the magistrate: **Romans 13:3-4 "3 For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. ... 4 for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer."** It was the magistrate's sword that brought bin Laden to justice.

Do I find it easy to forgive. In many instances, No! For many years I could not forgive the Japanese for what their military did to our men who were prisoners of war. For some reason it was easier to forgive the Germans than the Japanese. I don't know why; as far as I know, I have no German ancestry any more than I have Japanese ancestry. I won't pursue this any further here; I am just saying that I am not a plaster saint. Forgiveness is sometimes hard.

Today is a day on which our lessons are devoted to Grace and Mercy. Isaiah prophesies that the Lord will ordain peace for us and that ultimately, the dead shall rise. The Psalms sing of grace and mercy, St. Paul testifies of the Grace and Mercy God bestowed on him, so much so that the Grace in him labored to spread the Gospel more effectively than many of the other

Apostles. And Jesus' parable shows us that the soft and humble heart of flesh is far more likely to receive Grace and Mercy than the proud and hard heart of stone.

This coming commemoration is of a terrorist attack that killed more people than did the attack on Pearl Harbor that set off World War 2. It gives us good reason to think about one of the hardest commandments to obey that Jesus ever gave us and to see if we can learn by the Grace of God to obey it. The commandment of forgiving is part of the doctrine of Duty, and it is a complement to the Doctrine of Grace. We know that none of us shall come before God's throne on the Last Day completely unsullied by sin. We cannot appear to be sinless without having a cloak of the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have to pray for Grace that the Holy Spirit will soften our hearts and teach us how to forgive. With Grace we can do our Duty.

AMEN!